

Improving our schools

The people crisis

We’re facing a serious teacher shortage due to retirements and stiff competition for talent from the private sector and school districts in California and other states. Local school officials call it “the people crisis.” In addition to improving teacher salaries, the Legislature enacted new laws this year that give schools more tools to address the teacher shortage:

- To bring outstanding retired teachers back into the classroom, a new law allows qualified retirees to work up to 1,500 hours annually without losing pension benefits.
- School districts were given much greater flexibility to hire people whose teaching certificates have lapsed while they pursue renewing them.
- Alternative routes to teacher certification were created to draw talented people from the private sector into high-need subjects and schools, and “mentored internships” will help these teaching prospects to master effective classroom skills.

While these are good steps, they’re only a start. I’ll continue working with education professionals to find effective ways to attract and retain outstanding teachers.

Accountability

Successful education reform requires high academic standards, benchmarks and testing to measure progress toward meeting higher standards, and accountability for results. The Legislature made only modest progress on the accountability issue this year, budgeting \$2.8 million to provide focused assistance to struggling schools.

I want to make sure that accountability is near the top of the education agenda when the Legislature reconvenes. We cannot achieve the goals of education reform until we identify what is working in successful schools and replicate this success in struggling schools. In most cases, this will mean targeting substantial assistance to under-performing schools. But if in some cases a school cannot be improved without changes in school personnel, we must be willing to make the necessary changes.



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34th District



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Dear Friends,

The beginning of a new school year in the Seattle, Highline and Vashon school districts is a good time to discuss changes taking place in our education system.

Many of the changes are good news, including progress toward higher academic standards and improved state funding for local schools and teacher salaries. But other changes, such as a growing teacher shortage and shrinking state funding for school construction, show that we still have work to do.

This newsletter focuses on these and other issues that will shape the quality of our children’s education for years to come.

I’ve learned from my experience as a budget analyst for Seattle Public Schools and as a member of the House Education Committee that what the Legislature does – or fails to do – profoundly affects what students and teachers can achieve. But I’ve also learned that good teachers and strong parent involvement are the most important keys to helping children reach their full potential.

I hope this newsletter provides helpful information that encourages *your* involvement in our common goal of improving education. As always, I welcome your ideas about education and other vital issues. You can reach me through any of the phone numbers or addresses on this page.

Please keep in touch,

Joe McDermott
State Representative – 34th District

The Budget

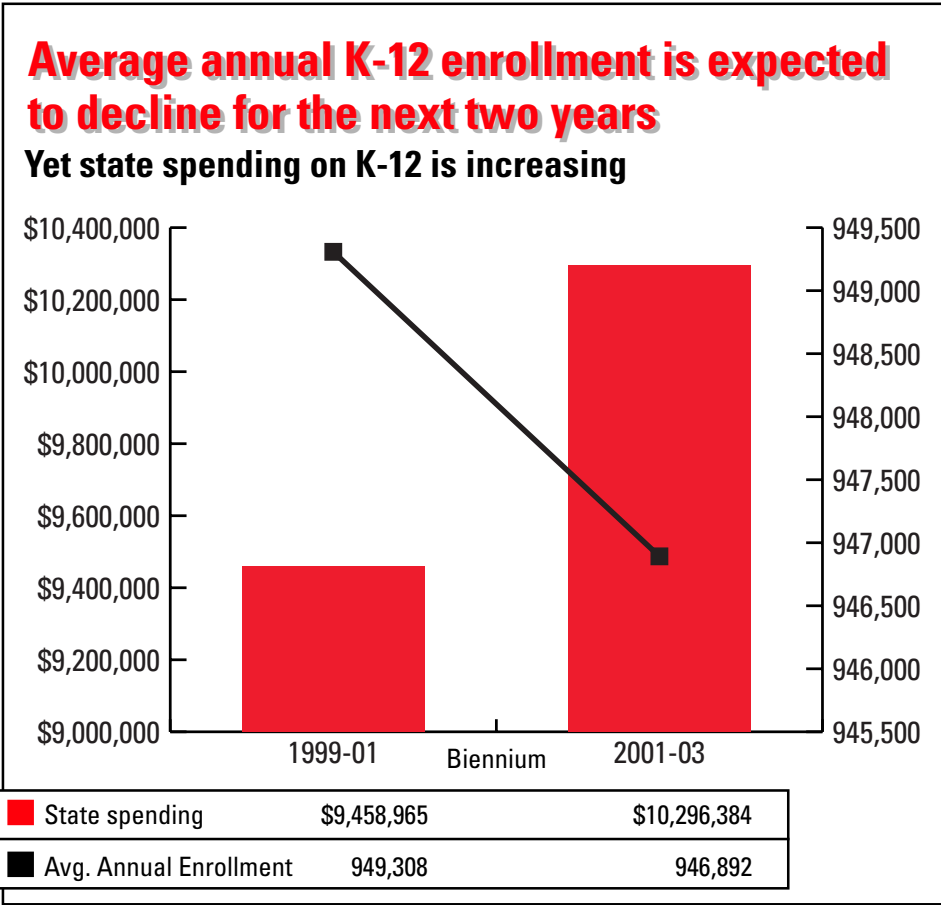
I’m proud that people throughout Washington voted overwhelmingly last fall to invest in stronger schools. The public’s mandates to improve teacher salaries (Initiative 732) and expand learning opportunities through smaller class sizes and other improvements (Initiative 728) made the new state budget the best for education in decades.

Some lawmakers wanted to fund the people’s education mandates by taking money from other education programs, such as the Better Schools Fund. I joined teachers and parents in strongly opposing this maneuver. We were largely, though not completely, successful.

The bottom line is that the new two-year budget increases funding for public schools by almost \$900 million – roughly a 10 percent increase in funding commitments for smaller classes, better teacher salaries and training, plus other school improvements. Per student spending jumped from \$4,982 to \$5,437. *This was achieved with no new taxes.*

These added funds are already having an impact in our local schools. New teachers are being hired, class sizes are being reduced, learning hours are being extended for some programs, and new classes are being added.

It is important to understand, however, that improving school funding is not a one-year task. It is an ongoing responsibility that must be met in every budget we enact.



Issue Focus: Improving our schools

School Construction

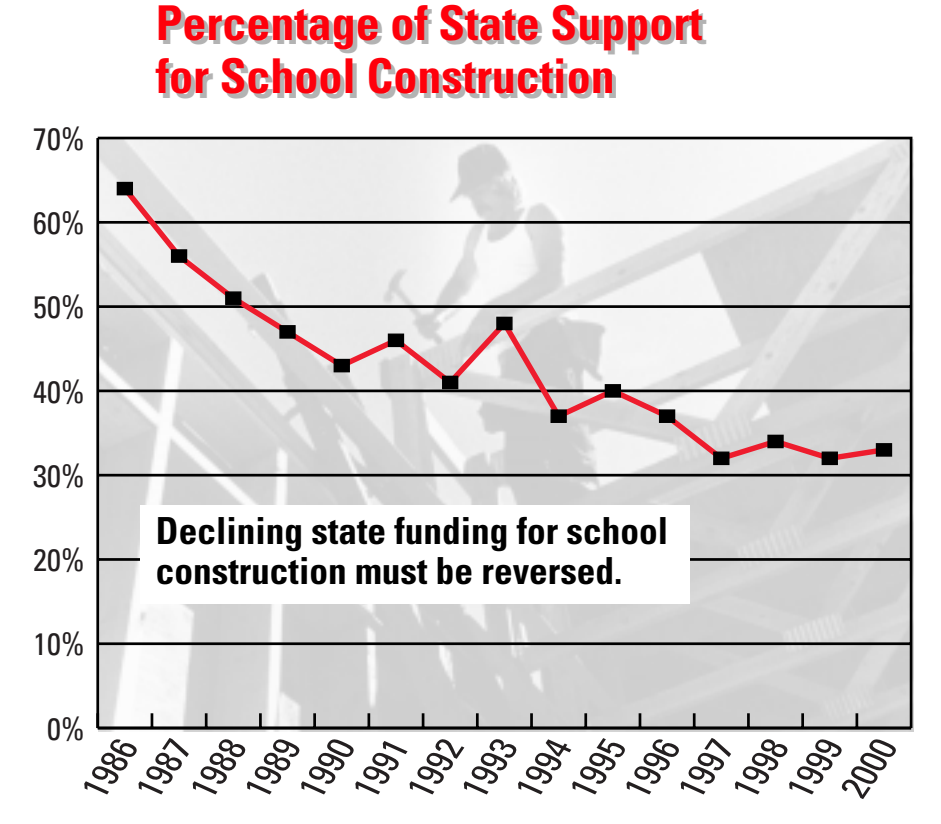
Did you know that the local property-tax share of statewide school construction costs has nearly doubled in the past 15 years? It’s true, and the reason is that our state government has cut *its* share of these costs nearly in half.

Restoring some of the state’s traditional share of school construction costs would be a tremendous help for school budgets *and* local taxpayers. This is especially true in the Seattle, Vashon and Highline school districts, where the state’s share of these costs is less than the statewide average. In Seattle, the state paid a mere 7.6% of actual school construction costs last year!

I’m trying to reverse the decline in state-level funding for school construction, and was recently appointed to a special House of Representatives committee that will propose possible solutions to this problem next January.

I hope you’ll support me on this issue. Increasing state funding for school construction is crucial to reducing class sizes and making advanced technology available to more students.

When Washington’s constitution says it is the paramount duty of the *state* to make “ample provision” for the education of children, it doesn’t make an exception for the costs of building school facilities that are safe and decent places to learn. For the sake of our children and local taxpayers, we need the state to live up to its school construction responsibilities.



Artist’s rendering courtesy of Bassetti Architects

The beautiful new West Seattle High School facilities will open in Fall 2002.

Taking bullying seriously

Most teachers and parents know that bullying and intimidation can destroy a child’s self-confidence and that bullying is a leading cause of school violence – including tragedies such as the Moses Lake and Columbine school murders.

Yet despite the harm bullying does to children and schools, an Attorney General’s task force found that 71% of students in Washington’s schools know of bullying incidents that were ignored by the adults in the classroom. In one case, a gay student was mock raped as 20 students laughed. The principal’s only response was to say “boys will be boys.”

I sponsored legislation requested by Gov. Locke, the state Attorney General and the Superintendent of Public Instruction to reduce the danger of school bullying. It would require *all* school districts to adopt and enforce locally-designed policies against bullying based on *any* perceived characteristic – including but not limited to race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, or mental, physical, or sensory handicap.

We haven’t yet enacted the proposal, but did secure funding (\$500,000) to help school districts design effective anti-bullying policies. While this funding is welcome, enacting a clear and firm state law against school bullying will remain a personal priority until we succeed.

“It can leave you hurting more than a cut with a knife. It can leave you bruised inside.”
— a middle school girl’s testimony on bullying to the Washington State Attorney General.